

HENRY BOSCO.

THE ANTIQUE DEALER.

NOVEL.

NRF. GALLIMAD.

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TO ALFRED LOMBARD.

Come, holy deities of the underworld, Earth, Hermes, and you, Sovereign of the dead, bring this soul back to the light.

AESHYLUS.

The Persians.

NOTE.

The characters and events of these two stories being absolutely fictitious, they cannot tolerate the slightest reminder of real characters, of events already experienced. The locations of the action were only chosen for convenience.

WARNING.

The pages we are about to read consist of two stories. First the unfinished one, where Baroudiel recounts his life, then the much briefer one, where his friend Méjean tries to complete, also to shed light, as much as he can, on Baroudiel's confidences. To the text entrusted to him by the latter before disappearing, Méjean attached the presentation of his own research, the inadequacy of which he is aware. Yet they can direct the mind to the opposing experiences, and meaning, of an internally dramatic life. They also show the outcome of a conflict.

1.

APPEARANCES.

I recognized him by his back. And immediately I remembered his motto:

Neither earth nor sky, But Surac de Pénéquel.

Because it was indeed him, Alexandre Surac de Pénéquel, who actually called himself Surac for short.

SURAC. Expert.

These are his business cards. No details regarding these expertises. He was an expert in all possibilities, and modestly, I believe, made his living from it. Modest life, in fact, under a broad, sonorous, magnificent name, which, despite his stature, his step, his confidence, the man himself seemed to deny. Because the stature was tall, the build broad, the step authoritative, all things that suited this resounding surname. But when confronted, the man presented a closed and inhumanly expressionless face. Then nothing more from Pénéquel or Alexandre, but simply Surac; and we understood. We understood: Surac, and the disappearance of other sound syllables; but the man, no, or badly, who presented the impassive face of an automaton and large green eyes without gaze. Which was striking. More than the thin-lipped mouth, more than the square forehead, or the harshly bony cheekbones. Not a glint in those magnificent eyes; because they were, but with exact indifference. Their function seemed, above all, to remain imperturbable. Neither joy, nor sorrow, nor contempt could be read there; and yet we guessed that they had a precise and irrefutable view of things. There could be no doubt that the world inscribed there, over vast spaces, the most subtle images of its multiple life. However, they did not cause any commotion of emotional colors. The almost superhuman clarity was never altered. The world was seen there, but not loved or hated, and if, behind this internally restrained spectacle, a thought lurked, it remained inaccessible.

Like the man.

At the time, I only discovered the back, it is true, remarkable. The shoulders, robust and masculine, had a military stiffness. Under the jacket, which fell without a crease, nothing indicated the size. The vast and well-built back moved as one, with each step regularly placed on the asphalt of the sidewalk.

He was descending, in front of me, towards the sea.

The wide and populous avenue led there by a gentle slope. The crowd was teeming there. Nonchalant and contradictory, she came and went, exhaling her buzz and her sweat. It was very hot. The sun had, all day long, charred the facades and, towards the evening, the heavy and bland humidity of the sea had fallen on the ground, which had become sticky. We were sweating. The overcrowded cafes gave off their sweetish fumes, and a thoughtless clientele watched this idle and sluggish crowd pass back and forth on the sidewalk. Nobody had a taste for anything. It was almost seven o'clock.

Surac alone, dominating the crowd with his head, remained, judging by his step, insensible to the general dejection. In the midst of the exhausted multitude, he retained this large, inflexible back which clashed with the universal spinelessness of flabby and sweaty flesh. We imagined it dry.

I had seen him from afar and had approached him with difficulty. Through the cumbersome and thick crowd, which moved listlessly and which ebbed and flowed aimlessly, I was able to slip, but with difficulty, because these walkers were slow, uncertain of their steps, morose, and, at the slightest contact, ready to some malice: Unusual predisposition and appearance, on this busy road, and on the part of an ordinarily affable and mobile population. The abnormally oppressive heat was, undoubtedly, the cause, because both the ground and the walls exhaled an odor of sulfur and tar. We were breathing badly. Nevertheless, I was able to slip through the human swirls and arrive very close to this extraordinary back. But when I was about to force my pace to overtake the man, I held back. Because I passed him so that he would recognize me. Something suddenly came to me about his strange character, and I judged it wiser to follow him.

I let him get back a little ahead and, cautiously, followed suit. But immediately the obstacle of the crowd intervened; he returned to hinder and thwart my pursuit. Men and women seemed ready to slow her down with their movements, which were both sneaky and disorderly. Instinctively, the dejection of everyone did not allow a single one to remain determined and still alert. As for Surac, it was notable that he went without difficulty wherever his own movement took him. Nothing stopped him. Despite its stiffness, it passed through these compact creatures with ease. He advanced straight against these fleshly bodies and, without hesitation, his fatal step pushed them aside. Although they immediately flocked towards him, his greatness overcame them. One would have said, at the very heart of this inconsistent matter, an incorporeal being. Strangely, no one turned around as he passed. Despite his tall stature and the ease of his voluntary walk, he did not attract the attention of the multitude. An unknown power made him invisible. I imagined he had it, perhaps, because he didn't want to see anything. Without contempt but closed within himself, he had to walk methodically in the middle of an unalterable thought.

Suddenly he turned left, cut through the amorphous mass and, with the same mechanical step, headed towards the shiny window of an optician.

I knew her. Moderating my advance, I let him enter the store, where the cruel glare of the electric lamps was already shining.

The motionless illumination, which spread in cold waves from four invisible foci, highlighted the severe and pure nature of the objects. On each wall shimmered the crystal of narrow, moving mirrors. Beyond, the fire of metals glowed. We could see, hanging on nickel nails, precision instruments: spherical compasses and anemometers, graduated rulers, compasses, sextants. On the clear shelves glittered glasses frames. Large copper barometers hung on the wall, between the display cases, and, on the bluish glass counter, a sparkling microscope had been placed, sheltered by a globe. Everything was clear. We saw everything. Along the objects not a shadow. The violence of the light elucidated all forms. The irradiation was so intense that the dazzled eye sought rest, in the midst of so many reflections, flashes, bursts, beams of blinding intensity. But nothing, not even a halo, came to appease this adamant effusion of light. As the source was difficult to locate, nothing really lived within this impersonal illumination.

Not even the two opticians: a lean, long man, and a woman, as long, as thin as this man.

Even more so, Surac.

Between him and them, motionless, this icy light shone its clarity. We would have said three signs rather than three beings. Surac had taken a large magnifying glass and was examining it. He didn't speak. His gaze fell on the magnifying glass which gleamed harshly. The other two also looked at this heavy lens, but neither they nor he exchanged a word. Between the magnifying glass and the glass counter, we could see a sheet of paper of dazzling whiteness, on which lay like a tiny grain. No doubt a small stone, some gravel, almost imperceptible. This is what Surac was looking at. No relationship, no exchange seemed to put him in touch with the object of his meticulous examination, this particle ideally exposed at the center of this pure paper. The two mute creatures facing him seemed to be witnessing a dream that did not concern them. While the crowd, upon which the shadow descended and which trampled slowly behind me, filled the avenue, there, through the ice, I perceived a strange world, where

immobility and silence exposed their symbols, under three human forms perfectly absent from themselves, let alone from the innumerable and obscure multitude which flowed by. Dazzled, fascinated, I only perceived a mental spectacle where an accidental play of light had produced illusory characters, born from nothing, come there for nothing, and from whom nothing, ever, could draw either a word or a gesture, but which would disappear, leaving no memory or trace, when the shimmer which had given birth to them, for no known reason, was extinguished.

To my astonishment, they moved. Surac placed the magnifying glass on the glass on the counter. The man handed him an oval mirror. The woman put the magnifying glass in a red case which she placed carefully next to the microscope. After which she and the man became wonderfully still again. Both had faded, expressionless blue eyes. On long, pale noses they wore thin gold glasses. These eyes stared fixedly into emptiness, absolute emptiness; and it was reflected there so well that no eye could be drawn to it. Even mine dissolved there. This is why these strange beings suddenly became foreign to my mind and passed, without transition, from this immaterial state to perfect inexistence. I saw them, but they were no longer there.

Alone, Surac seemed to be alive, in his own way. Having taken the mirror he lifted it a little, then leaned over. It was as if he wanted to see his face there. I guessed it from his attitude, where an almost elusive feeling of absence was perceptible to me. His face couldn't interest him, I knew that well. But he might need the mirror to discover other signs. I also knew it or at least suspected something of it; and this suspicion, conceived long ago, agitated me so strongly that I almost entered the store. Luckily Surac spoke, and his words had the effect of recalling the existence of the two abstract creatures that I had forgotten.

The sight of them is enough to stop me, instantly.

The man's mouth cracked a little, and he had to answer.

Surac put the mirror in his pocket, paid and, still stiff, with his fatal step, left the store and entered effortlessly into the shifting and dark crowd.

I had time to step aside. He passed. I followed him. But, when we arrived in front of the Stock Exchange, a flood stupidly separated us. I lost a step, and that was enough to widen this unfortunate separation.

Nothing disturbed his walking. He pushed people away without seeing them, and cars stopped in front of his haughty indifference. Its inimitable movement opened an easy path for him. There was, in his way of moving forward without concern for others, such simplicity that everything yielded naturally to his step. His cane fell sharply onto the sidewalk. She rang the bell. An ebony cane, without an ornament, but smooth, hard as steel. The shock was metallic. We were moving away from it. Listening to him, we didn't have the impression of a threat, but of a certainty. Because Surac made her fall on the sidewalk, without intention, with a mechanical but clear gesture. She hit him regularly and at the precise place where the impact should be clearest. He thus struck the ground and the mind. Even in the middle of the crowd, I could hear it hitting the road, indistinctly trampled by thousands of confused soles...

I made an effort and regained some ground. I was now determined to join Surac and talk to him. He didn't like people accosting him unexpectedly in the street. But I was leaving Marseille that same evening, and could I know when I would see him again, when we could have another interview? Despite the irritation and, what's worse, the dismay that resulted, for me, from our meetings, his singularity seemed precious to me. I considered it so rare that it was still a chance to be able to risk facing its dangers, mortal, perhaps, but of a quality, without a doubt, unique.

So I quickened my pace. I had managed to reduce the distance that separated us, and I was getting ready, with a rush, to join him. Suddenly a creature emerged from the crowd whose appearance stopped me. We had arrived in front of rue Beauvau. It was from this busy street that she left. I saw her emerge unexpectedly from the thick, indecisive, shapeless crowd. A long black sheath stuck to his body, a thin, flexible body. She slipped, smooth and dark, between these faceless men and women, who blended together. But she, who had a goal, skilfully freed herself from their suffocating press and, without effort, breast forward, with a long, supple step, followed her instinct. Because it was an instinct she followed, a great instinct that burned in her eyes, already darkened by the night. It made his face look pathetic. But was it really a face, a face such as one sees, living directly on his soul, and not a mask, a browned mask, with immobile features, with an appearance inflexibly obstinate in a single desire? And what desire! What, if not desire, desire itself, with no other quality than that of pure desire of all attributes, of the ancient original desire, primary source of all desires, the unknown desires, the innumerable desires, potentially contained at the bottom of

We? How could anyone have doubted it, seeing this dark mass of hair, this low, narrow and stubborn forehead, hard as bronze, and this whole voluptuous and voluntary body, with broad and slow shoulders, hard arms, tight hips, with intelligently imperious legs, each movement of which raised before him the heat of carnal life and the rapid fires of the soul, moved by his flesh? Walking gave this body a gentle sway that betrayed its secret ease. No doubt he could, at the same time, yield and grasp, bend and embrace. He was felt to be both lascivious and discreet, bold and indocile; and, much more than its boldness, its indocility and its discretion towards pleasure must have captivated the soul which united with it recklessly in the night. Because it was a nocturnal being who came to me, through the crowd. For its enslaving powers, its true mystery had to reside in invisible pleasures. Also there was in this creature an indefinable gravity, and this thoughtless appearance that destiny gives to those it needs to dramatically bear witness to its presence, in the face of our frail wills. This woman, suddenly emerging from the animal multitude, crossed it without causing a stir, like the barely human image, and yet so formidable to man, of necessity.

Someone bumped into me, whom I pushed away angrily, and who complained. But it was enough for me to turn my head towards this annoying person for the vision to suddenly disappear. The crowd had seized it again, enveloped it, distanced it from me, hidden in its shadow, absorbed perhaps or melted into it, and, from this marvelously distinct and precise creature, remade an indiscernible parcel within its incoherent mass. All that remained of her, after her passage, was a burning scent of vanilla and amber, which dizzyed me. It lasted for a while, then subsided and, thin as a thread, trembled, vanished, left me alone. Alone, delivered to the heavy and stupidly animated swell of this crowd which, without soul, was going to push me away, in my turn, hide me, abolish me perhaps, and thus make me as vain as the creature magic whose form she had just erased, dissolved existence. A sad and slow animal push made me turn imperceptibly towards the sea, and, fortunately, I saw Surac.

He was out of reach, but visible from afar, his head towering above all heads. Still walking towards the quays, at the same pace, with the same indifferent authority, he moved away into the light. For the sun, which sank behind the old quarters of the city, before falling into the sea, threw great sheets of gold across the sky, onto the roofs and the immobile forts of the pass. The body of water in the port reflected these immense flames in its oily and dark mirror, where the white hulls of a few ships slumbered. Nothing stirred in the air to disturb this brief illumination of the ancient sea; and this is how, like a reflection of the sun, I saw Surac, for a moment longer, very far away.

Then he too disappeared, and night fell.

I had a moment of cruel dismay. The feeling of my loneliness returned to me. It seemed to me stronger, more poignant, and of a completely bizarre nature. Instead of squeezing me, it seemed as if the crowd had detached itself from my body. An invisible void had opened between her and him. I was no longer threatened with envelopment and abolition. I found myself suddenly separated from the anonymous press. The human push left me there in a sort of strange abandonment, more disturbing, perhaps, and even more painful than suffocation. Like Surac, I was alone, but not above the crowd. The gifts that Surac possessed, and which surrounded him with a power of domination, I did not have. I was alone, like him, alone, but lost. It seemed to me, wherever I was, that I would bring this isolation. These thousand bodies continued to brush against my body, as they passed, but their animal pressure left me singularly insensitive to this impure and stormy brushing which made me nauseous. The void that separated me from it was this abnormal insensitivity. The smell, the noise, the movement, even the presence of men no longer disturbed me. Everything passed, and in a life foreign to my own life, isolated in its sudden solitude. I was at the center of a horrible tingling, the horror of which did not reach me. The deeper he sank into his vague darkness, the clearer it became that I was alone; but this light, which detached me from the night, dried up the whole expanse of my solitary soul. Around me swarmed the tumultuous multitude; inside me, a desert petrified. Rocks and sands, the brightest and driest land of desolation.

It was then that the city lit up with its innumerable lamps.

From this illumination I regained a slight power of emotion. I felt moved, moved by the night and by the darkness, by the dull dissatisfaction of the multitude powerless to pull a soul out of its sighing and dark confusion.

It frightened me, and suddenly I broke away from it, taking refuge in another street, a side street. Walking for a while, I reached a real alley, where the passers-by were considerably fewer than anywhere else. Most came and went. Their slippery gait, their muffled steps, had something calculated and equivocal. They were difficult to see, because few stores had lights. But among these idle, distracted shadows, the indifference and the indolent coming and going

created unease. Others were vaguely outlined on the threshold of a door, then, when approached, hesitated a little. But their forms, always elusive, retreated into the darkness of the corridor. As we passed, we could see the fire of a cigarette. We hurried our steps. A few idle dreamers stood at the corner of a dead end. Their hands shoved in their pockets, they looked up. In front of them too, we hurried our steps. Posted on the edge of the sidewalk, they remained dangerously still. We felt them stuck in this place, and obstinate, and hard. From the depths of the cellars, through the gaping vents, came humid breaths, in which the smell of moldy barrels was exhaled; and there were also smells of beer. From time to time, we saw a woman appear who then disappeared; and from a bar came a murmur of voices, which were suddenly pierced by a few bursts; then everything fell back into the general hubbub. Between the tall, gray facades of the old houses, a greenish glow floated, which diffused an impalpable and warm mist. It had removed and erased the little sky, which must nevertheless, from one roof to the other, exist very far away, and place two or three stars there, at night time. But for whom, these stars? No one was ever to see them. Life remained at ground level in this alley. Everything testified to it. This slow, ghostly and mysterious circulation had no cause, it seemed, than the care of attentive vigilance to other captive ghosts of this hidden depths, where everyone was watching for each other, where waiting, where the stalking of dark desires suggested unspeakable designs, furtive threats.

Without really feeling fear, I began to suffer the attacks of a cautious apprehension. It announced anguish. So, upon seeing, at the end of the street, a lit storefront, I was seized by the hasty need to place myself under the protection of its weak light. I had the feeling that it would shelter me, at the very least, from my worry. Poor clarity, however, and a sinister coloring. But I had to find refuge at all costs. It was one, no doubt, because I breathed when I reached it. But immediately the appearance of this solitary store struck me.

Behind the window, at the back of the room, you could see an old Auer burner burning. The gas weakly reached the asbestos sleeve. The glow was greenish. Against the walls it illuminated the shelves. From floor to ceiling, rows of books were stacked. Most of them bound and old, of which I could see the worn gilding. Others, bound, lay piled on a table across the room. In the middle of this piece of furniture, a copper armillary sphere had been erected. From the ceiling came a thread on which a crystal egg hung. A screen hid the back of the store. Just above, the Auer beak was burning. Thus, it illuminated the two parts of this strange room: the one that could be seen through the window, the one that remained invisible behind the old screen. However, the top of a door protruded above this obstacle. She was ajar. Through the aperture came a yellowish glow, probably that of another lamp, which we could not see.

Against the screen three large engravings had been pinned. I could barely distinguish the drawing, Chinese landscape, Chinese figures, probably, and, despite their imprecision, of extraordinary suggestive power. Because the little I discerned of them gave me such a desire to be sure, more precisely, of their charm that I entered the store.

However, I did it a little in spite of myself. On the threshold I hesitated. There was no one in this store. At first, that's what stopped me. Then I gave in, I obeyed my impulse, and one step was enough. It's enough to take me into another world. However, I only saw again what I had already seen through the window. But, from the moment I entered, I had the impression that I myself had become, just as much as this astrolabe, this crystal egg, these prints, a mysterious object. Like them, I could be seen from outside in the spectral light of the lamp. She had, suddenly, made me change my nature. I had gone from a shady street into a sort of unreal place, where man, it seemed, had nothing to do. Besides, no one, as I said, manifested their presence there in any way. And we could have believed it alone, if, through some unknown sense, we had not sensed it as a hidden attention. My step had caused the worm-eaten floor to creak. We must have heard it. However, no movement had detected that he had been heard. However, I was sure that there was someone, very close to me, who was listening, who was watching. But this vigilance was exercised, perhaps, through a mental veil, as would have been that of a transparent meditation interposing itself between the world and that which sees, hears, feels and touches the world. Non-exclusive meditation, where the exchange between thought and life was not stopped by the preponderance of reflection. I imagined, but I didn't know why I was creating a fantastic presence in this way. No doubt then I needed it, because I was anxiously awaiting some sign. Stopped in the middle of the store, my own presence embarrassed me. This embarrassment disturbed me to the point that I would perhaps have called, if I had not feared hearing my voice and recognizing it. She would have proven to me that I was really there, but I no longer knew what I had come there to do.

I didn't dare move. There was perfect silence in this store. The slightest noise would have had the effect of an unbearable outburst.

On the table, next to the armillary sphere, we had placed a folio, wide open, where we could see the earth proudly enthroned at the center of the world. The seven planets and the Zodiac orbited wisely around the globe. At the bottom of the engraving, figures, wearing turbans and long robes, were chatting among themselves, or pointing telescopes towards this reasonable Universe. But, very close to this celestial machine, other dark-looking grimoires evoked another Universe, less reassuring. Demons and shadows manifested themselves there. At least, the titles announced them: The Language of the Manes, The Key to the Seal, The Cimmerian Gates... Volumes, dusty pamphlets, thrown on the table in the greatest disorder.

I turned away from it.

I then looked at the screen, where the three prints were pinned up.

There, everything was bathed in calm, and the calm of a world without support or, at least, supported only by limpid ponds and sheets of air. Floating on this unreal expanse, a boat remained motionless and as if suspended. At its bow, a fisherman stretched the line of a flexible bamboo on an imponderable wave. The shore was only a line between the sky and the idea of this wave; but we felt that, without this feature, neither water nor air would have been visible. It was enough to create the two elements necessary for this fictitious country, without horizon, where however a few precise lines indirectly suggested to thought both oblivion on the waters and travel. I was taken in very slowly. It seemed to me, seeing this perhaps invented country, which rested, halfway, between the life raised in the calm of heaven and the intelligence attuned to the serenity of this celestial life, that I had discovered the ideal place rest, hitherto unobtainable. At least, I had searched for it painfully and for a long time in vain. He was there. We saw it on this fragile sheet of paper, offered to the rare and barely traced signs of Wisdom. The balance of water and air, of equal clarity, maintained order there. The soul quietly fished there for its dreams, its thoughts; and the translucence of this world was such that she saw them being born, both in the breeze and in the waves. However, this peace and transparency remained inexplicable. Their nature and perfection surpassed all earth-born intelligence; and their presence seemed an omen rather than an actual form of possible life. We felt the beneficence of it. However, it had a distant source, at the limits of the realities accessible to man. The power of the inexpressible being spread this spiritual and pure emanation. But she got there from even further. It was dawn and the memory of infinity...

A fleeting impression, dissipated by the disturbing shadows that haunted the street when passing in front of the window. Because these walkers had not stopped coming and going silently. In front of the store they did not stop, but their pace became slower and, without looking, they observed everything. My entry into this store and my attitude must have attracted their attention. I was there all alone. They could believe themselves to be observed, watched, in turn, recognized, threatened, perhaps, and they themselves became threatening. But as long as I was in the store, their hostility would remain powerless. I could guess it from their movements, which betrayed embarrassment. So they were content to patiently keep watch, waiting for me; because they were waiting for me. I guessed it too, and sometimes I wondered how I would get out of this predicament. So, to forget the dangers, I looked at the print. "She's the one I need to get out of here safely. » A strange thought, but the evidence seemed to me such that it was enough to reassure me. However, I did not dare touch this image of heavenly peace, the very sight of which made me unreasonable.

In the end, I couldn't stand it and, very quietly, I asked if there was anyone in the store.

It was almost only myself that I asked it, it was so gently; but however gently it was, I had spoken.

I heard a sigh. Not a word. A simple sigh. Was that an answer? Yes, undoubtedly, and a somewhat tired response which meant: "Who else is there? Let's see, can't you leave me alone for a bit?"

Then I heard a chair creak. Then another sigh, this one resigned. The floor groaned and I saw a head. She cautiously ventured to the end of the screen and looked at me.

A head without a body, with a white goatee, blue eyes, and strangely topped with a bowler hat pulled down to the level of the eyebrows. And this head was looking. I say: this head, and not: these eyes, but the whole, because this apparition gave the fantastic impression of being, all of it, only one look, a single look, of incomprehensible insight.

This look caused such uneasiness in me that, to dissipate it, I looked for my eyes. There, usually, the gaze remains. We can encounter it there, grasp it, and, when we ourselves have strong eyes, fix it in front of the thought it expresses or

veils. Even if it refuses and escapes, even if it resists and defies our eyes, at least we know what its precise source is. We circumscribe it. But the eyes that I found had no other expression than that of the whole head. Distrust and curiosity were everywhere infused and elusive. Both on the immobile mask of the face and in the completely limpid eyes, it was the same half-light, the same diffused glow, that of a thought which used all the virtues of the face to achieve an unusual knowledge. things. A physiognomy, at first glance, sad and disillusioned, but which, upon contemplating it longer, nevertheless revealed, behind its sadness, furtive fires, reflections, shadows. This head was haunted.

Suddenly, she began to live, to live like another head. She assumed a reasonably human expression. Immediately, following him, I saw the body appear, that of a man dressed entirely in black. He wore a short, old frock coat, and was rather short and plump.

He tells me:

Perhaps we made you wait...

Stunned, I didn't know what to answer. In a suddenly distant voice, he added:

I am sorry for that. But were you looking at these Chinese?...

I was able to confirm to him that I was looking at these Chinese. And I too heard myself speaking from a long way away. Our voices exchanged words, endlessly, above our heads.

They're not for sale, this strange man confided to me, almost in a whisper.

He was silent, thought, put a finger to his mouth, and whispered:

Confidentially. You see?...

He did not wait for my acquiescence and immediately completed his confession:

In fact, nothing is for sale here.

He closed his eyes and repeated: Nothing, absolutely nothing. This is how.

Opening his eyes, he seemed touched by my confusion: I had wandered into his shop, and excuses came to my lips. He stopped them.

But we can consult, Sir.

He took a card from his coat and handed it to me. I took it, with an embarrassed look. He immediately put me at ease.

Read. This doesn't commit anything.

I read:

RAPHAEL SOURBIDOUZE

Antique dealer.

Rue de la Conque, 7.

He took the card back, put it back in his pocket, and said to me:

To nothing.

But, with his left hand widely open, he then made me an engaging gesture. While repeating: "No, nothing," he invited me with such discreet courtesy that I did not resist it. I went with him behind the screen.

Between this piece of furniture and the dirty wall, we had installed a small desk with drawers. Paperwork and books cluttered it... There was also a letter scale, a black bowl, a glass inkwell, an alarm clock. A small armchair, covered in oilcloth, served as a seat. Loaded with ancient dust, hanging from a nail on the wall was a black overcoat. We must



have forgotten about it for years. It was hanging. That was all he could do, hang. We felt him heavy, resigned to his weight, finished. As long as the nail holds, he seemed to say, I will stay in this place. And he will last a long time, he will always last, longer than me. I will crumble...

Sourbidouze offered me a stool, and said to me:

At your service...

He seemed so obliging, so ready to hear everything, that I first thought it necessary to tell him about my trip.

I'm boarding this night.

Tonight? So, for Algiers, probably?

Yes, for Algiers. We're leaving behind schedule... A damage... We have to weigh anchor at eleven o'clock.

There's time until then, Sourbidouze pointed out to me, smiling.

A smile intended, but barely, and an easy, banal courtesy. Yet it denoted a subtle and sure knowledge of the smile. He promised a friendly audience, and reserved himself. We felt there this benevolence particular to the confessor, who knows, who sees in advance, and who resigns himself to waiting. While listening, behind a pleasant face, he follows the movement of his thoughts so as not to lose the thread, so fragile and so quick to break; and his thoughts take him elsewhere, imperceptibly...

Thus?...

These two words, spoken softly, offered me every possible temptation. I choose the first, the most natural.

These Chinese I say...

He interrupted me:

I understand. Continue...

It was chance that led me to this street.

With his head, which he bowed twice in succession, he made me understand that he recognized in this banal chance the power to lead an idle person into this street.

She doesn't get much traffic, I added.

He agreed.

It's calm. Little trade. A few residents.

These inhabitants, in fact, gave me a lot to think about. But I didn't show any of it.

Everyone at home, never any noise. This is what we need.

This "we" stopped me. He noticed it.

"We", because there are two of us, me and my brother.

And, pointing to the half-open door from which came the light of another lamp, he said to me:

He's there.

I suspected someone was in the other room. As I hesitated, Sourbidouze asked me:

Do you want to see him?

And, once again, with his widely open left hand, he made me this engaging gesture which had, in spite of myself, led me to where I was.

He didn't wait for my response. Ignoring my hesitation, he said to me:

It's easy, very easy...

Then he invited me in.

The door seemed to me to turn by itself, without noise; and in front of me I saw a man. Behind a square solid oak table, he was reading.

A smooth face and hairless cheeks. On the skull, very rare white hair, but carefully combed.

An elderly man: sixty, at least.

With lowered eyelids, his index finger resting on his right temple, he read, and he enjoyed his reading; but he enjoyed it in such an extraordinary way that I was struck. He smiled, but without affecting a single fold of his face, still and fat. The features themselves remained blurred and perfectly expressionless. They were caught and frozen in the flesh, thick and soft flesh. Nothing specific manifested this indefinably diffuse enjoyment over the entire face. But all over her face there was an inexpressible delight, as if the satisfaction of a secret gluttony had animated her. This expression seemed to betray the use of hidden pleasures, the knowledge of clandestine delights. She detected such a deep taste for these pleasures taken in silence that I immediately felt discomfort. I would not have been more troubled in my flesh and my soul, if I had then seen, deep within me, the face of an unspeakable friendship forming.

Deodore, Raphael's carefully muffled voice whispered close to my ear.

He leaned down to look at his brother, then half-closed his eyes.

I am, he says, only the arm, the weak arm...

With the slight movement of his head that was usual for him, he pointed out this brother, who was still reading.

This is where the thought is.

And he looked at me.

The whole thought, he told me, firmly.

Then his wary eye turned all around the room, to examine every slightly dark corner.

The examination finished, he leaned towards me and, once again, his mouth approached my ear.

But I barely heard him whisper to me:

And much more! much more, you hear me? much more than thought!

That's telling you!...

This was indeed telling me a lot. Although it was hardly imaginable, I thought for a moment that he was being ironic. Despite myself, a slight smile appeared on the tips of my lips. But a look stopped him dead in his tracks. A hard look. I took it for granted and nodded. The harshness vanished and the eye, all blue, resumed its expression of discreet kindness. I tried to respond by forming another smile, but this time, with consent.

Raphaël Sourbidouze looked, craning his neck, at the page of the book his brother was reading and, always careful not to raise his voice above the most hushed whisper:

Let's wait a bit, he told me. He doesn't like people to disturb his reading. But I see that he is reaching the end of the chapter and, there, I will draw his attention to us, or at least I will try... He took my arm in a friendly way, with a complicit gesture. Through the material I felt his fingers. They squeezed me a little. Déodore was still reading, as if he was completely unaware of our presence. His reading kept him busy, gave him pleasure, separated him from us. It seemed, however, impossible that he had not noticed some sign of our arrival in the room. We were in front of him and we were looking at him. The weight of a look counts. Mine weighed heavy. And, about him, I examined

everything with extreme attention. But especially the hand, the left hand. A round and perfectly fat hand, placed flat on the polished wood of the table, and sometimes a finger moved with pleasure, very gently.

Smooth and pink was the skin. The nails shone there, which had to be carefully polished every day. Not a ring on these pudgy fingers; but, on the wrist, a thin bracelet of green gold encrusted with small emeralds.

Suddenly the singular idea came to me that it was there, in this fatty and careful hand, that the thoughts of this man resided... "Thought, all thought," the voice whispered in my ear again. by Raphael. I said to myself: "Why does this idea come to you? » And Raphaël, always Raphaël, was there, revealing to me a little more of this astonishing mystery: << All the thought, and much more... » Much more, but what? Otherwise what animated this chubby and voluptuous hand with imperceptible movements? For she took part in the reading and the thoughts descended until it nervously moved her fingers; but, from the hand to the thought, was there not a contrary wave, which would agitate the mind in various ways, which disturbed its always perishable order, and which perhaps took its place, without did we know? I was inclined to believe it, but the nature of this fluid, the existence of which I assumed, was impossible for me to define. Invention of an overly imaginative mind, favorable to the most singular fantasies? - Maybe. I know myself, and I was on guard against this spirit which easily deludes me. However, there, in front of this very concrete hand, this sensual and well-placed hand, I was not dreaming. This hand had its thoughts: a tactile knowledge of things which went beyond ordinary manual qualities and powers. Brushing, touching, palpating, caressing, anointing, but also clawing and seizing, crumpling and hugging, were undoubtedly, for this hand, not material operations but acts of true intelligence. In the hollow of his soft palm, along his fat and soft fingers, there certainly lived a sort of magnetic heat, which, from all the touches, constructed the unimaginable thought that was specific to him. Strangely, it seemed to me that, in this man, the pure place of knowledge, the abstract expanse where the sensitive images of the world are ordered into clear ideas, this hand held them between its fingers. A mental universe difficult to understand and dangerous to confront had taken birth there.

Thought was not formed there in the light to fix its own fires there. It slipped constantly from shadow to shadow, from glow to glow, and one could only follow its evolutions by the trace of feelings whose passage revealed, through brief and disturbing phosphorescences, the hidden existence. . I stopped in time, on the edge of these delirious speculations, which opened towards the abyss.

The hand still rested on the table, demure and tapping. Next to her, I noticed a chiseled silver bell, placed on a small round of felt. Nothing more, except the lamp.

But, behind the table and Déodore, another character seated, facing the wall, in front of a desk, had his back to me. A weak back with narrow, skinny shoulders. This character was, at the time, in shirt sleeves, but wore a brown luster waistcoat. From the pointed head, topped with a black cap, that of the sacristan, little could be seen except a slender and wrinkled neck. Huge tendons protruded from it. With diligence, this little old man wrote, with his long, bony, yellowish hand, on a large register leaning against the desk. A sort of grandiose folio, in front of which he seemed even more slender and thinner. Yet, as stupid as he was, his body was there. There was his place; and he occupied it, as one uses an indisputable right. Right acquired, recognized, confirmed, which legitimized some obscure fidelity to the secrets of this unusual house. Apparently absorbed by his task as a copyist, he nevertheless gave the impression that he was not in ignorance of what was happening behind his back. You couldn't fail to notice his ear. It was so pointed and stood up so straight, level with the crown, that it was impossible to believe in coincidence.

This ear was listening.

In the organization of this antique store, Raphaël was on the lookout, and this little old man listened.

Meanwhile, Déodore read without haste, enjoying it. But did he read? Were each of these three men really doing what they seemed to be doing? I was beginning to doubt it a little, when Déodore, having reached the end of his chapter, lowered his eyelids completely, clasped his hands, placed them thus joined on his book and reflected. There could be no doubt that he brought back to himself, as gently as possible so as not to break its fragile chain, the still fresh impressions that his reading had given him; and it was visible, by his air of satisfaction, that he enjoyed it. He prolonged this almost perfect enjoyment for a good while, then little by little he changed his face, imperceptibly his lips moved, and his mouth took on unction. He thus achieved a priestly gravity.

This is not the time to disturb him, Raphaël's ever-cautious voice confided to me in a sigh. But he will soon, at least I hope, return to us. You just need to have a little patience. I'm watching for the signs...

I watched them too. Because this return to us was inevitably going to be announced by signs.

They were kept waiting. Deodore was in no hurry. That he saw us, I didn't doubt it for a minute. He knew we were there. My unresolved curiosity, the respectful silence we observed in front of him, probably pleased him. He was enjoying it too much not to postpone the moment of return, the contact, the words. But shouldn't he let his idea mature, the one that throughout his reading, my presence, slyly perceived, had suggested to him?

Because, on this point either, I had no doubt. I had a presentiment that these three men never conceived a thought that did not leave other thoughts meandering around it, like vigilant animals.

For then, nothing was perceived, and Déodore remained serious. But, from deep within him, slowly, the idea, matured at his leisure, pushed him to put himself within my reach, to become accessible again, to find a banal expression.

And so the little mouth pouted and began to smile.

But his eyes remained downcast.

Déodore seemed to be saying to us:

Speak. Here I am back. I wait...

We could hear the steel pen of the copyist screeching regularly on the page, where he transcribed God knows what thoughts and with what words! This squeak was painful to me, and I don't know how Raphaël got the idea of it, because he said to me:

It's Mathias. He writes. He writes the Memento of the day.

He was still whispering, but a little louder.

Every evening, we recap...

Deodore inclined his head, a slight sign of approval. He was there.

We summarize, we register. This is what we call, in short, a Journal. Mathias excels at it...

Mathias, who heard everything and therefore his praise, said softly:

Mr. Raphaël is exaggerating. And Mr. Raphaël, certainly, makes me happy. But all the same I would like (said with all possible respect) that Mr. Raphaël would call me by my patronymic name, in the presence of a visitor who comes here for the first time, especially if he is of note .

Again, Deodore inclined his head. He approved.

Raphael replied:

It's just. I should, in fact, have told you the patronymic name of Mathias. Between us, and out of affection, he is Mathias only. Fifty years of loyal and good service; in fact, half a century of friendship is what binds us. However, the real legal name, the official name of Mathias, is...

He interrupted himself:

But in fact...

He looked at me. I understood very well. He wanted to know my own name first.

I was somewhat reluctant to give it to him, but I did it anyway:

Baroudiel.

The little old man turned around. Two lively, piercing, astonished eyes. A quick look.

Ba-rou-di-el, repeated Mr. Raphaël, chanting these four syllables, as if to get them stuck in his head forever.

And pointing to the old copyist:

Introibo.

The old copyist bowed towards me, with great dignity.

Introibo, repeated Mr. Raphaël, this time for me, because "Introibo" had surprised me, and he had seen it.

Then his brother Déodore looked up. He looked at me attentively, but with extreme kindness.

Baroudiel, he said, I hear this name... Baroudiel, Baroudiel... Argent with three branches, ranged Vert, overlaid Sable, on the chief Azure charged with three stars Or... Isn't that so?... Beautiful coat of arms, beautiful name too, Baroudiel de La Hérondaye, to put it bluntly, or almost everything... And, if I'm not mistaken, the motto is:

All gall, All honey, Baroudiel.

Which is hard, no doubt, and which indicates a difficult nature, but not ordinary. It is true that "<the Word"> softens the motto, and it sounds good: "Bread and salt." » House which makes virtue of hospitality, Sir; and please have my compliments here.

He spoke in a low voice, trying to envelop the sound of the strong syllables, placing delicate lips on the high sounds, containing words that were too intense, as if he wanted to adapt the words to the confined air of the room. too dazzling which he had to use to show me that he knew about me, even before knowing me, what, by simply calling me Baroudiel, I had neglected to say.

Sir, I replied in the same voice, I admire that you have such exact knowledge of all this. But, as for me, I do not possess any of the virtues that you praise in those of my family who have disappeared for a very long time. As for my faults, they are, I believe, very different and of a smaller kind. Neither gall, nor honey, nor bread, nor salt, I am, alas! than Baroudiel. It's not much, but it's enough for me.

It pleases you to say, Sir, replied, in the same peaceful and courteous tone, Déodore. But it happens that we ignore, through simple negligence, our most original qualities, those of which our ancestors gloried, with some reason and perhaps some profit, in times past. Now, these qualities are only dormant, but a discerning eye detects them by signs that the common person does not see. So are you, sir.

Of me?

From you. Because, would you have entered this store, all in all strange (I do not pretend to deny it) and certainly not pleasant (you will probably agree with me), if you had not carried, without your knowledge, within you, a character different from the one you usually are, and which was suddenly revealed, thanks to this meeting?

Without giving me time to respond, he showed me a seat.

Take a seat, Mr. Baroudiel, since Baroudiel can, which I regret, still satisfy you; and do not be surprised at anything, not even to hear me say that you are also someone other than yourself. Right or wrong, we're all there, sir. This is how our nature wants it. It takes at least two people to know that we are, which is our only reason for being in this world. Two is the least we can be. In fact, you can imagine that we are not sticking to this paltry figure. Innumerable, we are, innumerable, Sir; and it is there that begins the most astonishing adventure that it is possible to attempt in this world, since it is on the whole world that it opens to these innumerable ourselves still asleep, but capable to live. To live is to multiply them indefinitely to the desire that their unsatisfied multitude offers to life indefinitely. Happily !...

Mathias had turned towards us. His stool being too high, he had brought his thin legs under him. The pointed knees thus reached up to the chin; and the face, with lowered eyelids, expressed fervor, with intense discretion.

Raphaël had placed himself a little behind, to my left. I didn't see him. But there came to me a human warmth, which displeased me.

Déodore was silent, to give himself time to move, without surprising me too much, from eloquence to a familiar attitude. He succeeds well; but I was not fooled by him, nor he by me, who pretended to be, out of curiosity. Because I wanted to know where he was going with this. At times I asked myself: "Where are you and what are you doing here?" What you see there, do you really see it, and is it possible?... What time is it? » But Déodore did not give me time to inquire about the fact of the hour. He continued:

I said: dissatisfied! A multitude, Sir, universally dissatisfied! Like me, like you, everywhere and always. And right here, here, where this dusty store which bears the Antiquarian sign offers customers, apart from a few very special books, no object of such commerce; here, where Raphael, my brother, certainly taught you that nothing was for sale; here where, since your entry, nothing can seem true or probable to you, do not deny it; because Mathias, neither Raphaël, nor me, nor my words, have that natural air that we find in very recognizable people, I mean who always present themselves to your eyes with tangible bodies and who always occupy your ears with speeches already heard...

He had not been animated by the slightest fire throughout this eloquent tirade, because he had taken care to attenuate its eloquence by his usual muffling of sounds, by the sweetness of his smile, and by his look which softened when the sentence became a little too broad.

I was careful not to interrupt him and he was careful not to allow me to do so. Mathias was no longer breathing. Raphaël had retreated a little further back, but his unpleasant heat was still perceptible to me.

Deodore continued:

Dissatisfied! So you are dissatisfied yourself.

And you ask yourself, "Who are these people?" And what does this business that sells nothing mean, these three old men at work (but what work, I don't know), and finally these remarks that are addressed to me, who came here for the first times, and who am personally unknown to these antique dealers? »

Did I see it right?

With a sign, I confirmed to him that he had, in fact, been right... His face lit up, as if to say: "It's quite obvious. »

Well, Sir, I could, I should, perhaps, grant you this entirely legitimate satisfaction, which your curiosity tacitly demands.

He separated his fingers, spread his hands, and presented them to me with an open palm.

Nothing would be easier for me. A word to Mathias, a gesture, and, behind me, this door would open sufficiently...

There was, in fact, a very low door in the wall which had not attracted my attention.

I smiled, to show Déodore that the word and the gesture would not be unpleasant to me.

He seemed satisfied with these arrangements, and smiled in his turn; but gently he brought his hands together, and nodded his head.

Patience! Everything in its time, dear sir.

And first...

At that same moment, someone entered the store.

We heard the creak of the door opening, the shock of the bolt. Then there was silence. The floor, so old and so quick to crack, did not move. It was as if the visitor, having barely entered, had become immobile. Immobility so strange that it surprised my interlocutor. I had a kind of vision: a being of stone and salt had entered, and was waiting in the shop... The vision went away...

Behind me Raphaël made a sign. I guessed it when Mathias relaxed his legs and slid off his stool, without making a sound.

Deodore no longer spoke. I could hear Raphael's breathing, very regular.

Mathias, who had felt slippers, crossed the room like a ghost, slipped through the opening in the door, and disappeared.

Déodore resumed the thread of his speech:

And first of all, isn't it nice to really get to know each other?

Now, what is more favorable to confrontations, exchanges, useful communications than a meal?

He gave himself time for a brief silence. There was no mistaking it: what was happening in the store worried him. He wanted to hear something...

But nothing...

Déodore made an effort, which he covered with a smile, and continued:

A meal is already a communion, a mark of confidence, the dawn of a friendship, and, as little as it is delicate, far from weighing down the mind, it expands it and inclines it to a propitious abandonment...

There came from the shop a confused murmur, as if in protest, but muffled.

So I said: propitious; that's it. Conducive to everything, and especially to desire. For what faculty, what power, what human force, can be compared to desire, without which there would be neither regret nor hope in us?...

In the shop a voice suddenly came alive, a woman's voice. And they certainly wanted to silence her, by speaking to her gently, by urging her, because Mathias, whose whisper we recognized, was praying to her. We didn't understand the meaning of his words. But the other responded with passion. Although Mathias became more conciliatory, more persuasive, at times, this woman allowed her too-long-repressed ardor to raise her voice. She repeated, with force and fierce stubbornness: "I tell you again that I want to see him, I want to see him. » And Mathias begged her to be silent, to be patient, to wait. Because he too, little by little, had to raise his voice. Thus the discussion was likely to take shape and become understandable to me...

Raphael moved. Déodore brought his two quiet hands together a little more and lowered his eyes with compunction.

Raphaël left the room and went into the shop. This time the floor creaked. And that had to be enough. Because Raphaël doesn't say a word. Everything fell silent. Silence fell unexpectedly, by magic.

Excuse us, Deodore murmured. Time to settle...

He did not finish, his intention not being to tell me what he expected to be settled in the shop.

But I think it was done masterfully.

Raphaël returned and took his place again. Immediately Déodore raised his heavy eyelids and, with his gaze, questioned him. He seemed satisfied with the response that his brother had to give him, also with his eyes. Tranquilized, he brought his bulging, expressionless eyes towards me.

It must be about eight o'clock, right?

I looked at my watch. It was, in fact, five to eight.

Would you accept a modest meal?

I made the usual polite gesture he expected of me. He only gave it its conventional value, what I, for my part, expected from him. In fact, I was curious to know the rest of this adventure. He guessed it. We got along perfectly.

Once again, in the store, silence. More people. Not even Mathias. It was a miracle. I hid my astonishment as best I could. I don't know if Deodore was fooled, but he became even more friendly. Lifting the silver bell with one finger, he made it ring. Two light, pure blows. And he got up.

I got up too. He showed me the low door which, very slowly, opened before us, revealing an arch and a wide staircase. They were going underground. But, at the fourth step, the staircase stopped in front of two doors. Two identical doors, clad in iron, bristling with nails, armed with enormous locks.

As slowly as the one above, the door on the right opened, in turn, without Déodore having made the slightest sign or made the slightest call.

They were waiting for us.

Behind us, the clapper, still in silence, returned to the wall; and I found myself shut up with my hosts in a low, small room, without any window. A slice to eat.

I was expecting some strange staging. However, nothing of the sort. On the floor, large red tiles, carefully waxed, were shining. A carpet. I thought it was horrible. Table, chairs, sideboard, sideboard, ordinary mass-produced furniture, in the Henri II style, but as well polished, as shiny as the tiles.

Two lamps. One, placed on the sideboard. It was supported by a green faux marble base and a pink lace lampshade veiled it. The other, a suspension, made of de-gilded cast iron, was held to the ceiling by four ornate chains. At the end of each chain, a hook personified a sphinx, unless it was a mermaid. This pendant light overhung the table, which held beautiful linen, fine crockery, dazzling crystals, opulent silverware.

Against the wall, at the back of the dining room, stood Mathias. Cut into this wall, we saw a ticket window, closed for the moment. Next to it, the service.

There was an even, subdued light in the room, which attenuated the relief of objects and faces.

We took our places around the table. Me, to the right of Déodore, facing Raphaël.

Déodore sat down in a wooden armchair, the back of which exceeded his round head by a foot and a half. An extraordinary emblazoned and monumental armchair, the only piece of furniture that seemed noble and authentically from the depths of the ages. But he was ugly, all the same, and there he was swearing.

Raphaël sat down on a stool. As for me, I was given an imposing chair and, despite everything, quite comfortable.

Déodore took his time before settling into his high cathedral, then he carefully pulled the end of a well-starched cuff out of the sleeve of his frock coat.

Then he raised the index finger of his right hand and waited. Raphael, having looked at him, called in a sweet voice: Introïbo.

The tone surprised me. "Introïbo" was unpleasant to me. (Why not "<Mathias"> as before?) Vaguely disturbed, I was immediately on my guard.

Introïbo, however, responded to this patronymic call by knocking on the ticket window, which opened. He took a dish which he placed on the sideboard.

Deodore spoke.

A modest meal, sir, I warned you. But, if it has any merit, which is slight, it owes it to care whose effectiveness you will judge, for yourself, later, on taste. All you have to do is smell it first. Our dishes are seasoned with herbs, for which I am responsible, alas! at some discretion. Excuse me. But what does it matter, if they flatter the sense of smell, if they make the slightest taste an ineffable delight. Because, in my opinion, there is no exquisite food without rare spices melting into it, penetrating its fibers, impregnating it to its very essence and, to put it bluntly, composing it. extreme succulence. Introïbo!

Introïbo, who listened impassively to the praise of spices, bowed; he took the dish from the server and, cautiously, advanced towards us, carrying this incomparable dish. There was, in fact, a scent exhaling from it which immediately went to my head. A strange dish, all amber and gold, stuffed with agate, a delicate jelly, of which I could identify neither the complex aroma nor the translucent material, which had been prepared, no doubt at length, by expert and sensitive hands.

We tasted it ceremoniously.

It predisposes, Deodore announced to me in a solemn tone.



He predisposed, in fact, and to hear everything, first; because, from the first mouthful, you felt what you thought of yourself and, thus, of everything dissolve within you.

Note carefully that it does not intoxicate, Deodore continued, while tasting it with relish. Intoxication cannot be suitable for a dish whose purpose is to open the mind, to soften the body, and to facilitate their effusion, then their intimate fusion, which is, I think, the supreme goal of life. But few of us know how to achieve it. They aim too high or slide too low. It is not enough to grant the mind pre-eminence, in order to live, if the mind kills life, Sir, and it kills it well, given the opportunity. All that remains is a nasty piece of parchment skin, which no longer even feels the touch of a gnat...

I listened, and I listened well, because the intention of such a long and noble speech escaped me. And then, to convince myself that I was not dreaming, all my attention was essential. In the dream, attention ceaselessly fades and, constantly, a thousand figures escape us. But nothing that I saw, heard, tasted and smelled went unnoticed by my senses. My intelligence remained perspicacious. A single sign could have detected in me a little delirious doubt. This scene was incredible, and so everything could have led me to believe that I was dreaming it. But I didn't doubt it. I knew I was taking part in it, really. Neither Déodore, nor Raphaël, nor Mathias presented themselves to me as ghosts. They had bodies. Yet this observation, which actually surprised me, made me doubt myself. I was sure that they were present, and that I felt comfortable with them. But, at the voice of Déodore, my personal existence tended to change its nature, and he would not have surprised me by telling me that it was me whose improbable presence at this meal, served in a cellar in the city, could make one believe in some fantasy.

To dispel this formidable aberration and to reassure myself on my own account, I deemed it necessary to speak:

I hear you, I said, interrupting Déodore; I hear you. Your words are timely; because chance has it that your host, Sir, was predestined to pay, this evening, the keenest attention to remarks such as those with which you knew how to accompany so delicately a unique dish. Now, this dish is unique, I like to proclaim it, and worthy of predisposing the intelligence to the enunciation of thoughts...

Raphaël looked at my hand, the left, which I had, while speaking, put forward on the table.

The spirit pleases me, Sir, and pleases me only too much, I continued; or rather I took pleasure, and sometimes still take pleasure, in the extraordinary speculations of a man who lives only from his mind, as a dilettante, that is to say not without disdain for what this mind conceives as confused and from incoherent, let's cut the word, from absurd, and not without pleasure, from the fact that he orders it, forming from this chaos some precise thoughts. But he only orders it for his pleasure...

Which is not absurd, after all, Déodore pointed out to me. Pursuing pleasure, even in one's thoughts, can be understood; but then, Sir, then...

Afterwards? Everything is here! Your subtlety hit the mark.

He seemed satisfied with my approval, expressed thus, in flattering terms. But Raphaël drew his eyes to my hand.

You have a curious ring there, Mr. Baroudiel.

A cameo? An antique?...

Instinctively I flexed my fingers. But it was too late.

Raphaël took an enormous magnifying glass from his coat and, taking my hand:

Do you allow me, do you allow me?...

Oh! Oh! A wonder!...

Embarrassed, I wanted to withdraw my hand, but Raphaël would not let go of my wrist. He held out his magnifying glass and, winking, leaned over the ring.

Mathias had moved closer. Deodore looked at me with astonishment, and with an air of courteous reproach, as if, possessing such a treasure, I had failed in my duties by not making some inventory of it in the house of such a

hospitable antique dealer. In fact, wasn't I a strange man, a man who hid half of his name, and who wore, without saying anything, a jewel worthy of upsetting Raphael himself, so master of his emotions, so positive ? Little by little I would have looked guilty. But the interest aroused by the ring distracted Deodore's attention from me. He asked Raphael:

What do you see there?

Dionysus, Raphael replied, in a voice so troubled that I was troubled in turn, without knowing why.

And he, so low, that his words were nothing more than a breath:

Dionysus Zagreus, can you hear me?

I hear you, said Deodore, no less moved.

Unique piece! Nothing is missing, neither the Thyrsus nor the Nebride... And what an engraving! What art! What a stone!...

What a talisman! murmured Mathias, also leaning over my hand.

Thuras epithesthe bebelois! Close the doors to the profane!

Deodorus chanted religiously.

Mathias, very respectful, stepped back.

And you didn't know anything about it? Déodore asked me, looking scandalized.

I knew very little about it. My maternal great-granduncle, Carolus-José d'Aquilar, a great adventurer before the Eternal, having once fought for a long time in the Indies, had received there as a gift, from some Mogul, this cameo, which I had inherited at the end, by chance. I wore it. And that was it.

But you wear it! cried Deodore. You wear it!

It's all there, sir, everything! I don't say it without intention, everything! Because you have on your finger (on your ring finger, to be precise, on your wedding finger) more than a ring, a world!...

And solemnly opening his arms, he added:

A world! Now, this world is our world, exactly the same world, the one that your servant and his brother still haunt here!... A sacred and secret world, a world forgotten by stupid humans, and yet still alive, a world which, unbeknownst to them, is biding its time, a world which takes strength from the Earth, the Earth which is there, Sir, there, under this house; and the Earth has enough to make it collapse on our heads, because, with an imperceptible sigh from its bosom, it can abolish this entire immense city which will, in a few hours, fall asleep without concern for its underground gods, whose patience is long, certainly, but resentment is fatal...

A day will come!...

Horried, Mathias cracked the bones in his fingers.

With a brief gesture, Déodore, annoyed, told him to behave better.

He will come, he said more peacefully, but it is not for tonight. Let's not anticipate, Mathias. This night, a favor is offered to us...

Mathias, a little reassured, left his fingers in peace, and retired near the gate.

Raphaël still held my hand. He tells me:

If it is not too much, Sir, to ask you, could you, for a moment, entrust me with this admirable ring, so that I expose it to the light, and thus try to draw from its stone some of the unknown lights that it most certainly conceals.

I consented, but I had to do it reluctantly.

Déodore sensed this slight repugnance.

Perhaps, he told me, she will thus reveal to us, as much to you as to ourselves, fires that have long been dormant in her deepest veins, and whose secret has been lost. Because, for only a few who are qualified, a truly precious stone shines with all its light. A stone lives and keeps itself; There is no creature in the world more reserved and who more subtly refuses the indiscretion of the vulgar. With an ordinary finger, we make it dangle; but the germ of its true fires is only heated and radiated by the call of the most fervent love, that is to say, of the highest knowledge. There are a thousand ways to offer its facets to the emission of light which inevitably produces some reflections. But the true angles of incidence, the sacred angles, which alone can direct the ray to the heart of the stone, only a few learned people know how to form them. Because, only the original Center, this primitive Heart of the crystal, responds to this privileged ray whose unique point it returns, metamorphosed and unrecognizable, in seven beams of a brilliance so celestial that it dazzles the eye, fascinates the eye. spirit, illuminate the soul...

Raphael, having taken the ring, exposed the stone to the flame of the lamp, and, magnifying glass in hand, while studying it, he made its colored surfaces shimmer with religious slowness.

And he said:

I see the god... And, behind the god, in transparency, his mother Persephone...

His mother Persephone, Deodore whispered, like an echo.

It is therefore indeed an Orphic stone, a jewel engraved for a myst of Eleusis or Thebes...

Iacchos, Demon of Demeter and He-who-directs-the-mysteries...

The Archegetes, replied, still echoing, Deodorus, the Giver-of-wealth, the Iacchos-with-ox-horns, the Immortalmortal, born of Zeus and devoured by the Titans, the one whose ashes created men...

Deodorus, inspired by this very strange mythology, had come to life and, raising his cup, he looked at her with that expression of delight which announces illumination and ecstasy.

Raphael, fascinated by what he saw in the stone, described its contents which, according to him, revealed the most mysterious secrets of the Universe.

He spoke in a distant voice, which was no longer his usual voice; and he said, in his delirium (because he seemed beside himself, exalted to the extreme):

I now descend, with Demeter, into the depths of the Earth. And I see there the occult Sources of life, the Origins. Here, the telluric deities maintain and heat the vapors which rise from the bosom of matter, by obscure paths, to the flesh of beasts and men and which, from there, slip into the soul, to own it.

Vapors of sensual intoxication, which lead the mind astray and disturb sleep with incomprehensible dreams, inspiring delirium, mothers of divination. Through them only our hearts communicate with the god, the underground Dionysus whose power makes plants and trees germinate, grow, flower and bear fruit; because he is King of vegetation. From Zeus, he holds the spark of life which blossoms in wild transports in the caves and, from his mother Persephone, who reigns over the Shadows, the generative power, dark and slow growth of the seeds buried in the warm bosom of the earth. Dionysus is the soul of the world...

I held back, as much as possible, so as not to give in to the exaltation. Because, from Raphael, ecstatic, emanated a contagious power of intoxication. Yet the fury of his flame, while inspiring him with eloquent sentences, did not transfigure him. His voice remained impersonal, his posture impassive. His face kept a cold, inert mask. This coldness, this inertia made the emphatic impulses that his visions inspired in him even more astonishing. It nonetheless took on a growing influence over my mind, although it was by nature resistant to the frenzies of the soul. I fear the conflagration, which offends my taste for speculation. I therefore retained enough composure, and I was not without thinking that Raphael and Déodore, seized by a sudden delirium, must be linked to obscure powers of madness. They bore the signs. All madness terrifies me and horrifies me. But the signs of it acted like a charm, and it tempted me. Despite the tone, the accent, which showed no ardor, these words carried, in themselves, an energy so effective that, despite my defenses, I was shaken. My usual lucidity, which always cruelly resists when drunkenness attracts me,

nevertheless persisted in the midst of this disorder. Nothing escaped him, and small details, all material, were sensitive to me. I heard the muffled rumble of cars passing over our heads, which, from time to time, rumbled, making the crockery and crystals on the sideboard shake. A large obstinate fly, like its kind always are, obsessed Deodore's moist forehead, and he mechanically chased it away with his hand. This gesture irritated me. Because I found myself doing it myself, as if the stubborn fly had been harassing me. To Raphael's voice, Mathias, religiously carried away into a world of fabulous images, expressed, by clasping his hands, his emotion at participating in such transports. He suffered its prestige with an air of adoration, which made him touching, but also of unshakeable credulity, from which one could hope for everything, and thus fear everything.

The gate, next to the sideboard, had opened a little, and delicate scents were coming from it, those emitted by the dishes from which Raphaël and Déodore had composed their evening meal. They solicited the mouth and the nose; they excited desire and suggested ill-defined pleasures. Thus they awakened the dark powers of the body and thick blood.

Raphael sat down again, placed the ring in the middle of the table, and Déodore spoke in turn, but in a tone so suddenly reasonable that I was stunned.

Do not believe, Sir, that you have fallen, through an incredible adventure, into a place of madness. In the eyes of a light and banal mind, the dithyramb of my brother Raphaël could pass for the expression of learned madness. However, this is not the case, and you feel it, having yourself, in addition to this talisman which gives you some enlightenment, a very clear intelligence, and even too much, if I dare express all my thoughts.

Intelligence in which the most violent enthusiasm cannot obscure the order of reason. Thus we are, all three, sensible and very positive minds, who do not sacrifice to illusory illuminations. What we say is based on indisputable experience. What Raphael has just seen, he has seen and really, because it is; and we too saw it when we listened to it. For what is it about that is not, here, Nature itself? When I name Dionysus, am I not naming the power which causes the moist and generative principle to rise in the veins of the trees? God of wine, be it! It is easy fodder to give to the vulgar, who see of themselves only the cup and material intoxication. But, under the influence and this intoxication, there is, Sir, what sustains them, a dark and hot being, an obscure heart, a confused and powerful life, and even a thought!...

He thought he had surprised me. So he left his sentence hanging, and he looked at me.

Perfectly, a thought! A thought which does not agree with our intelligence, and which is nevertheless a thought. A thought that is communicable and that we can, if not understand, at least hear or see, in ourselves, as long as we are sensitive to the meaning of the obscure words of the Earth. Call this thought a dream, if you have no other word to name it; because it may be a dream, but what does it matter, after all? Is not the soul also a kind of dream, which feeds on the earth... For it is from the earth itself, the Mother of everything and all, that this dream comes, a passing guest of our bodies formed from its clay, nourished by its juices and its mineral forces. Here, Sir, we have the worship of the Earth, and we worship in secret, under this vainly noisy city, underground, the Substance itself...

He had stood up and grown up. Raphael, too, was standing in front of his brother. I alone remained seated; and, petrified by so much eloquence, I admired that, starting from the courteous tone of simple conversation, Déodore had reached this pathetic confession of faith. For, in his turn, he had been lifted from his calm to passion, and, while maintaining control of his sentences, he was approaching a trance.

Mathias, fallen on his knees, seemed to be praying fervently. The gate having opened completely, a face had just appeared there. It was a sort of mask with a snub nose, a beastly lip, and a bristling beard reaching up to his powerfully bony cheekbones. This mask lived. If his features remained immobile, the enamel of the eyes, very large and widely wide, shone beneath monstrous black eyebrows; the cunning look gleamed with mischief. A cruel and sneaky demon haunted this shaggy head, which completely filled the narrow opening of the gate. I couldn't take my eyes off it. At times, to help me, a noise came from outside, perhaps that of the marching crowd, which passed, ignorant, some hundred meters away and suddenly, to shake off its weariness, heaved an immense sigh. . This sigh brought me back to mundane life and reassured me somewhat, but too briefly, and besides, wasn't it the breath of a tired animal?

After a moment of silence, calm returned to Déodore's greasy face.

In the most natural tone, I heard him say:

Gentlemen, let's finish this meal.

And he sat down again.

Raphael imitated him. Mathias left his prayers and resumed his place in front of the sideboard.

The bestial mask disappeared. The meal continued.

It's not very late, Raphaël said matter-of-factly, looking at the time on his watch. We have the time...

To savor, as is appropriate, this wine which smells of vine flowers, replied Déodore.

At a sign from him, Mathias poured me a drink.

And then Deodorus spoke:

Such a wine is the triumphant king of summer, and summer, the undisputed king of the seasons. Flame and sun, Sir! Because, if the grapes ripen nobly in autumn and ferment there, it is in summer that they reach the peak of their annual life. He touches the perfection of his nature. Winter has already put the winds, the frosts and the snows on the effervescent germs that animate its life. Then the wine fell asleep and little by little decanted into the oak barrels. In spring, if it is reborn, clearer and softened by the winter cold, it is to exhale its first perfumes. We smell it, and we already sense what its supreme quality will be. The years pass and each season releases an aroma. It thus reaches its peak. Then, taken from the shade and coolness where it sleeps at the bottom of the cellars, it manifests, in the middle of July, its highest wine virtues. For July suddenly exalts him, and he burns with the fires that burn the substance of the earth. The sun in all its strength travels through the Sign of Leo. The vital flames of the world, the energies, Sir, are passionately passionate about everything that lives, and everything blazes with their devouring flame. The wine blossoms, it heats up, and it emanates the most exquisite ether, the intoxicating vapor of its bouquet. It has the smell of fresh branches, vine flowers and ripe fruit. He is the tendril, the vine and the cluster. An intimate sympathy unites it to the perennial momentum of the saps which, in the fiery and calcined vineyards, under the blaze of the maddening sun, are already preparing the future grapes of the future autumn. He is the wine and he is still the vine. Let us drink it, Sir, this night, and, as a sacred sign of friendship for the Earth, allow me to pour a few drops, well counted, on this ring, which was once worn, certainly, by the agitated Bacchae of the God, in the caves, at the time of the mysteries...

He made the libation and drank. I drank too, and Raphaël in turn drank the last one.

I was tired. The wine was getting to my head. It was warm, vibrant, and, although quite thick, had a delicate flavor to the tongue. We did not fear, feeling it flowing so lightly, the powers of intoxication. However, he took the thought in a very slow circular movement, but which made it elusive. If it always came back before the eyes, if the eyes followed its hallucinatory rotation, at each turn, it lost somewhat of its weak consistency. It gradually became a simple image, still visible but ever more blurred and less understandable. What did it mean? We no longer knew it, and, no longer having any meaning, as it remained alone in sight, intelligence was abolished; but one felt a strange well-being in having nothing left of one's thoughts but an improbable phantom, a false pretense, illusory itself, and incapable of opposing the weakest idea to the pleasure of losing oneself in the confusion of one's thoughts. existence and the indefinable being of life. To my eyes, everything was still precise; but their sensations themselves remained a dead letter to the mind. He got nothing out of it. I only watched the show, without intervening. Thus, I saw Déodore's big protruding eyes, his shaved chin, his dimples, and his creamy skin, which shone with sweat. He had a scar above his eyebrow bone. His soft mouth, which spoke of abundance, was moist with heavy saliva. I heard exactly what he was saying. But his words didn't agitate me. If I understood them very well, the intelligence I had of them remained unreal. I received the meaning, but I was incapable of interpreting it. So I had no premonition. I limited myself to hearing, in passing, the eloquent sentences which came from Déodore's mouth to my ear. Hearing alone had replaced intelligence, and memory passively recorded sound constructions. Because I was all passivity, and from this passivity I took a pleasure such that nothing could reach it, to disturb it. So I felt no anxiety when I heard Deodore say to his brother:

Aren't you afraid that he is in danger?

I fear it, indeed. For a foreigner like him, our street at this hour is certainly disreputable.

He has a seven out of ten chance, at least, of not going unnoticed. So what...

Don't you think it would be wise for him to entrust us with this ring, at least for the time it takes to get from here to his boat?

That would certainly be wise, Raphael replied.

Mathias could drive him to the dock. With Mathias, he has nothing to fear.

I repeated this phrase to myself, the only one that could have stirred my thoughts, and I was able to ask myself: "Why Mathias, this puppet?..." But the alternating voices of Déodore and Raphaël took me back and I forgot.

In any case, it would be better to order the coupe straight away.

And take our friend out via rue de la Pompe. Deserted, but if we act quickly, almost sure...

Yes, almost..., said Déodore. That's it, almost...

But do it quickly, quickly...

Mathias approached. Orders were whispered in his ear at length. He went to pass them to the gate.

Then he came back and stood behind me.

I was sleepy. However, as the meal was drawing to a close, I was able to put on a good face. The dessert was fruit, which I found fragrant and juicy. I took great pleasure in it. Deodore's eloquence had fallen. Raphaël occupied the silence as best he could, saying banalities which, leaving me inattentive, seemed pleasant to me. I didn't answer it, but I smiled, inclined my head, approving everything, mechanically, and happy to give my approval without difficulty.

From time to time, an aphorism reached my brain and sank there.

From Deodorus, dogmatic:

Obviously, we had to hope for the unexpected...

Or from Raphael:

The mirror is the image of the soul...

Bits of thoughts, thrown out categorically and which seemed to emerge unexpectedly from a series of reflections whose chain had not been given to me. I was no longer able to find the links and even less to link them to the speeches which had animated the meal previously. But these sentences pleased me very much, and they inspired in me a very lively admiration for Raphael and Déodore. They would have said more simply: "It's hot, it's late", or: "Are you having coffee?" ", that I would have had, perhaps, such an admiring feeling for these words, however modest.

I do not deny it. But they were careful not to make such remarks and, with words as moving as hope, the mirror and the soul, they maintained this lucid intoxication where I accepted what they said, and could say nothing about it. .

However, the passage of time was no longer perceptible to me. What I saw, heard and felt remained perfectly lasting. Having no active thought in me, there was no reason why this state should ever end. Being does not end, and I was being, whose imperturbable well-being provided me with a happy consciousness, but so light that I no longer saw any difference between the fullness of this absolute and the pleasure that I took it. Everything was good and good, because everything was. People, things, situations, responded to some deep need I had for them. Only a tiny distance separated me from events and people. Was I not like a double of Deodore, of Raphael, of Mathias? And was not this mask of a beast, which had appeared at the gate, the monstrous reflection of my own face offered to me by the invisible mirror where, that night, I looked at myself?

He's taking a long time, murmured Deodore.

This practical remark gave me some sense of the situation. I say:

But where did the ring go?

Because the ring had disappeared from the middle of the table where Raphael had religiously placed it.

The ring, replied the soft voice of Deodore, the ring, we have put it in safety...

This last word almost brought me back to myself.

I had to frown a little.

For Deodorus added, sighing:

It would have been better if he had remained here, in our custody...

Then, sighing even more:

But, we will give it back to you...

The emotion having tightened his throat, he needed a moment to be able to say:

...at the right time...

A vague promise, which must have worried me, if it is true that, numb as I was, there was a voice within me which timidly, and I still hear it:

-I care about it, you know, about the ring...

This remark must have seemed very childish to Déodore, who pouted and replied:

Either! you hold on to it... You hold on to it honestly, as one holds on to some jewel that comes from the family. But, Monsieur de La Hérondaye (and this is how I must now call you), it is not a question of such a feeling, which is of a purely domestic nature. For, if fate has caused this ring to fall to the heir of a house who is not unworthy, perhaps, of receiving such a noble deposit, it is not in the capacity of possessor that you wear a wedding finger on this finger, but as the chosen guardian of a treasure, to which others than you (and to this day more qualified, I dare say) attach sacred virtues, and thus have rights.

Rights? I couldn't help but retort, surprised by such arrogance.

This weak protest irritated Déodore, who immediately replied:

You, these are duties that you have.

I hate being lectured to and a feeling of anger shook me. From my features, Déodore must have noticed this startle. He immediately softens and, in a very serious tone:

Wonderful duty! Unique destiny! he chanted, moving mission! From now on, Sir, you acquire the support of those who honor, right here, without everyone's knowledge, these unreasonable and powerful mysteries. Here and elsewhere, elsewhere and everywhere! Hic and alibi, ubicumque! And they are already, and will still be tomorrow, at your orders. Their vigilance will follow you throughout your journey, step by step. Ah!

from now on you will no longer be alone, and if, unfortunately, our ring were to be lost, or taken from you, it is to them that we would have to send the distress signal. To them, your friends! Because they know, they can, they act. And no one is aware of their science, suspects their powers, or identifies their actions. We are the ancient and unshaken underbelly of this mercantile City which, without us, underground hosts, unknown roots of its animal life, would die of consumption on its riches. For we maintain the hidden fire, from which rise, through the ground, the Dionysian fumes which happily disturb his body, lascivious and cruel, affable and secret, familiar, provocative, insane and wise and, what is more, gaping, Sir, but intimately unknown! Now, whatever it was, his food needed a ferment that would make it intoxicating. Well! it is we who obscurely introduce the substance into these heavy foods from which it delights. This body may not have a soul, but it has an intoxication!... Like us, moreover, because I no longer know if, apart from intoxication, we ourselves have this soul that we attribute to men. I doubt it and I drink.

He drank. And again we drank. But it was the end of the meal, time to leave.

During Deodorus' speech, signs had been made; arrangements had already been made... While we were standing in front of the door, Déodore touched my arm and said:

You arrived among us unexpectedly. For thirty years we have been waiting for a sign. It was you who finally brought it. So I did not hesitate to reveal to you the nature of our commerce, which is not to exchange precious objects for gold with men, but to express what, for lack of a better term, we call the thought of the Earth. Without us, it would only be a murmur deprived of meaning for reason; because reason is not attentive to murmurs and understands nothing to the language of seas, forests and rocks, especially nothing to the dull roar of rivers and underground lava. Reason only understands reason. Here we strive to hear Life...

He showed me the closed door, barred with irons.

It will open, he told me. This is the threshold. You will quickly pass through dark rooms. The time has not yet come to enlighten you. I revealed to you, last night, the first angle of the mysteries... You now know that there are mysteries, and they are many! But I don't need you to swear an oath to silence. The ring is a formidable guarantor of your discretion. Whoever wears it is silent. If he does not keep silent, life leaves him, and sometimes it leaves him of its own accord. It's the worst. Because he is neither alive nor dead... Introibo!

Introibo unlocked the door. We went down four steps in complete darkness.

Count to four, Déodore whispered in my ear. Four, Earth... Count, but not out loud. Mentally...

Raphaël lit an electric torch. We found ourselves in a vaulted rotunda, where four doors opened. The four Directions, Raphaël taught me. I open to the East. This is where we will go down. Underground we go very far, under the houses of this district... Raphaël took the lead. Mathias followed me and Déodore held my arm.

We took about fifty steps down a corridor.

The walls were shiny and bluish, the floor was sandy. It seemed dry to me. The air was heavy. However, although we had gone underground, it did not smell damp or musty. From distance to distance, we could see a niche dug in the wall; but she was veiled with a cloth. A subtle scent of incense and sandarake floated under the vault. No noise. The footsteps, muffled. The sand softened the walk. Insensibly the ground descended. We arrive at another rotunda.

Light it up, Déodore said to Raphaël.

One of the niches lit up, on the right.

Get closer.

I obey. Raphaël raised a curtain. At the bottom of the niche a shutter turned and I saw a gate.

Through its silver bars, intertwined with branches and foliage, a lamp, which remained invisible, shed its light. It illuminated a narrow, vaulted room with bare walls.

In the middle, on a pedestal, stood a marble head. She could only be seen vaguely, and in profile. The lamp only touched the forehead, the bridge of the nose, the tips of the lips, the willful and suave chin. The cheek, the ear and a tall dark hair remained in the night. But the eyelid, half closed over the eye, took on a little light in the lamp. Seen thus, this profile, traced by a pure thread of light, no longer held to matter, but offered the outline of an extreme spiritual illumination. He seemed to have detached himself from his own face, however illuminated by meditation. He had retained no memory of his thoughts, not even that mental shadow left by the immaterial word of intelligence during his lucid actions. Nothing of the earth, nothing of the sky, as we see it from the world. But an emanation, the effusion of another light, more than the presence of being, and more than the soul, even more than the soul the dawn, the unimaginable dawn, beyond everything..

This surprises you?

In the ear, the voice of Déodore...

Far from our own mysteries, you must think?



I thought so, in fact, and did not hide it.

He says :

The most dangerous enemy!... But we have a few others, less beautiful, it is true.

Unique piece, Raphaël pointed out to me. Wei period.

He thinks, you see? He thinks! The visible does not exist:

there is only thought, replied Déodore.

The Bodhisattva can only think, said the positive Raphael, in a tone of polite condescension.

But his thought destroys soul and world, and thus destroys itself. All that remains is Nothingness, the Void. It's a small thing...

And Deodorus quotes:

The ideal is itself only an appearance, a trompe-l'oeil, a dream, an echo, on the running water a reflection of the moon... There is only Him beyond being and non-being, He who exists in non-existence. He is Unity and Void, Everything and Nothing...

This is the danger, Deodore concludes, and, here below, for us, immediate danger, magical danger. Because don't think that this marble is harmless. Look at it carefully. Is he smiling? We couldn't tell. Is this contempt? Worse, maybe. We guess nothing, nothing at all! What is the point of hair or love, what is the point of living? No mercy!...

And he is beautiful! He is very beautiful, he is the most beautiful, he is even beyond beautiful! He is the most terrible opponent! We cannot see it without trembling, and will I, Sir, myself, admit it? I'm afraid of him. So I locked him up, as a precaution, in this small, well-closed chapel, well sealed underground, and I treated him with unimaginable respect. Consider (and I am an expert in these things) that these figurations of the Absolute always hide, in a hollow of bronze or marble, a prayer tablet of terrifying effectiveness. A word, a gesture, a breath, an impious, obscene thought! can awaken its words, unleashing the latent forces which presided over the form in which this Inexpressible manifested itself, where it became a creature. We must be prudently imbued with piety, with forms, especially, Sir, if they express what has none, the Ineffable...

He stepped back, took my wrist, was shaken as if by a brief spasm, sucked in air violently, exhaled it and in a low voice said to me:

I have him in chains. Here he is my prisoner. No one knows except us. But I have built for him the purest and most secret sanctuary. A lamp the night before, night and day...

Hey! What does it matter to him? will you tell me...

Is he not the Inaccessible, the Indifferent?...

But you never know?...

To prevent any possible resentment, mysterious grudges, I put magic necklaces around his neck, every day, different, or rather every night, because it is the Inuit that I come to find him, here...

And jade, always jade! For jade, if it has a venerable age, a holy origin, is a stone charged with pleasant virtues, according to the Scriptures, to those beings born of the stone, and whom only the stone can, it is said, charm. Thus I conjure, as much as possible, this Spirit enemy of the earth, which is our only reality, our only refuge, our only joy...

You follow me?...

I follow you, but...

Don't object! We must believe. The slightest objection would send us into madness. We would think we were crazy. And I'm not delusional. This mysterious head is full of unknown powers, and the more beautiful you find it, the more it will enslave you. Fortunately, to warn us, there are demons, who also threaten us, and which I have walled up,

there, behind this creature, in the wall. It would be better. Their snarky, grimacing images would terrify you. But I have bricked them well, and so they remain powerless. There are eight of them.

Self-defense, said Raphaël. Because these gentlemen are formidable. Very ugly, too, very ugly.

The Chinese call them Lohan. You can see from here!...

The curtain returned to the grating, the head disappeared.

We started walking again, the ground rose. Now no more niches, but a low, damp corridor, which came up against an iron door. Mathias opened it carefully, but not without waving a large bunch of keys.

I found myself in a very dark courtyard. All around the high, black walls of the house. Not a lamp, not a lit skylight on the upper floors. A pungent smell of soot, boards, old scrap metal. And, in front of us, blacker than everything else, the horse, the coupe. The huge horse, the narrow coupe. High on wheels, it was a sort of rolling box, an obsolete, funereal vehicle. Two large copper lanterns, with two poor wicks burning, allowed us to see the driver's feet, whose upper body and head remained shrouded in shadow. These large feet, clad in leather sandals, were powerfully apart and sure of their strength. We imagined, from there, a colossus. I looked in vain for the face of this man, who had, despite the heat, hooded himself. It occurred to me that the head that appeared at the gate must have looked a lot like it. I was no more reassured for that.

Raphaël invited me to take a seat and I climbed into the coupe.

Always with the same precautions, Mathias unlocked the gate which opened onto the street. But, before pulling the doors, he waited. Because Deodore and Raphael were bidding me farewell and they were doing it without haste, learnedly, ceremonially, as if they were observing a cadence, as if they were following a precise rite.

Philosophers were cited to me, the Chinese traveler Hiuan-Tsang, in particular. I had no light on him; but he was given to me as a man skilled in extricating himself from the worst misfortunes, the model of wise men. The most down to earth advice alternated with the highest sentences. I received the oral breviary of the pilgrim who will face the innumerable dangers of a long journey in a strange country. I listened, more lucid and almost calmly, but without being surprised. I could have smiled, except for myself, at these sentences which colored a banal journey with a supernatural virtue. But I didn't want to. Because, beneath these bizarre words, incommensurate with my habits of language, I felt the presence of a heavy thought, long weighed, and charged with formidable forces. We had views, perhaps even precise designs, and a worrying practice of obsession. I acquiesced in everything and, not being able to respond with dignity to so many recommendations and aphorisms, I was only smiling on the outside, but within myself attentive vigilance. Because I was waking up and more and more. My reason was now able to reach me and advised me to be patient, committed as I was still to this unreasonable adventure. You had to listen, forget nothing. Above all, I had to be told that everything would not be over when I set foot on the boat. And then there was the ring, the possession of which suddenly became extremely dear to me. However, they still held the ring. Their promise to return it to me did not seem honest to me. I missed him a lot. His deprivation, which the day before would have been simply unpleasant to me, now disturbed me in a singular way. It was as if, despite myself, I had given a pledge. I have a strong reluctance to get involved. Now, my people had a passion for imposing chains, a need to enslave. In the realm of their secret life they ruled by gravity; they used the attraction of the Earth, their Divinity...

Offshore, Raphaël told me, you will still have a little breeze, and the wind from the ship.

I envy you, said Déodore. What a summer night, on the sea! And the sound of the water!...

On condition, added Raphaël, to move to the front, because of the chimney. At the back, she throws her dust at you. It chews you up.

But Déodore, less positive, recited in the shadows: O Africa! Earth and Fire! the body and intoxication! said the poet of you. Because, he cries, you are marked with the Sign of the Earth, and your reality is earth, sand and rock, mass and flame! You contain, in your mineral veins, the furrows of fire and the smell of calcined stone. The matter within you is omnipotent. It preserves undiscovered substances, still unknown metals and still intact deposits from ancient solar years. You have fossilized all the fires of the Sun. The Sun is your eye, the desert your mirror...

Katoptron!...

A quarter to eleven, Raphaël said very firmly, motioning to Mathias to open the gate, which turned. It revealed a sort of ink-black cul-de-sac.

By the way, Déodore asked me abruptly, what are you going to do there, in Africa?

I tell him:

Precisely studying the Earth. I am a geologist, sir.

He stifled a little cry.

But Raphaël hadn't heard anything. Someone had just appeared at the gate.

Step aside! Still there! But he's the demon incarnate!

What stubbornness!...

It was Raphaël who was growling, swearing a little...

I will know who is in the coupe, replied the apparition.

I recognized the voice that had been chatting in the store.

And a perfume came, heady and sweet, of incense and myrrh.

I leaned out the door. With a whip, the driver slashed his enormous horse. The beast, suddenly detached from its dream, started and took off. The fragile coupe was torn from the ground. Mathias, nimbly, reached the seat in a single bound and sat down near the coachman. We rushed past. I caught a glimpse of a woman. Raphaël held her by the wrists. She didn't move. I wanted to open the door, but I couldn't. The coupe moved away, we turned very quickly and took a narrow street, at full gallop. Strange vehicle which, running like this at full speed, made almost no noise. Only the horse's fast hooves clattered on the wooden pavement. After two hundred meters, we slow down. I then noticed that the windows had been raised and blocked. The door itself was locked. I struck a match. Brief glance at my cell... Walls, benches well padded with green wool. On the wall, a crystal flower holder hung, with a very fresh rose; a silver candle holder, under a glass globe... My foot, moving, stepped on a hard object. I picked it up and put it in my pocket. A small format book, or notebook. I'll see later...

We were still driving. The green fabric of the coupe smelled of benzoin. Annoyed by the smell, I took a look outside.

We had taken the quays of the Old Port and were now going, at a slow trot, towards Fort Saint-Jean. On the left, the oily and foul-smelling water of the Old Port. A multitude of small canoes, painted white, dozing side by side. Fantomal, a yacht at rest. Two or three schooners at the dock. A few tugs. No life. On the still water, heavy with grease, red reflections, here and there, coming from the cafes and a few illuminated signs.

In the taverns, the drinkers in their shirt sleeves were sweating. We saw them mopping their foreheads, under electric globes. The bland air smelled of oil, sewage and anisette. Then all this disappeared and, under La Major, we passed, still at a slow trot. Finally I recognized the quay, its cement hangars and, right next to it, a high wall of black sheet metal, pierced with four rows of portholes which illuminated the night. Above them rose the whitish superstructures and two red chimneys, from which a thin column of steam escaped.

We spoke at the gate with a customs officer. He let us pass, with a suspicious air. The coupe stopped just at the foot of the ladder. Mathias jumped. He was, for an old man, so agile that he amazed me.

He delivered me, apologizing very much because the door often got stuck.

It's so old, he groaned.

At the foot of the ladder, we spoke again with a company agent. We had to wait. The coupe moved away to the gate.

We were still boarding, through the stern gangway, in small packages, Kabyles, deck passengers.

A winch hoisted barrels and couffis into large nets. Night work, where a few indolent dockers helped out. They gave it with the greatest laxity and we could hear them huffing and grumbling in disgust.

It is true that we were suffocating.

Squatting on the ground, in front of mountains of stacked boxes, the Kabyles, grouped closely together, awaited the call from the bridge. When it rose, four or five of them, bundles on their backs, went hastily towards the ship. The others were silent. A little away from the gathering, a single one was murmuring a hoarse and sad chant. All were dressed in horrible jackets and beret caps, except one, long and thin, with an eagle's beak, who wore a scarf. He stood, looking contemptuous, in the midst of his silent companions. A heavy customs officer, obviously tired, shuffled back and forth alongside the ship.

All the passengers must have been on board and already in bed, because on the decks only the crew could be seen passing by.

Do you hear, Mathias asked me, this Kabyle who is humming to himself, over there, near a barrel.

And his singing is not happy, at least for me.

It depends, sir, it depends. It all depends on what we mean by cheerfulness and sadness. Do you know what he says? Listen carefully. He sings about a girl from Ouled M'taâ, picking pomegranates in a garden...

Astonished, I turned towards Mathias.

Do you understand his language?

Modest, Mathias contented himself with saying:

We lived...

From his tone, it seemed to me that he was not dissatisfied with this confidence. My astonishment must have flattered his vanity. She showed up immediately.

Here's what he sings, roughly:

O memory, I drank my tears, All my tears, all! bitter tears, like the black laurel of Imin Tizert... Who will bring my complaint to you, O Aini, red partridge? Who, if not the woodpigeon? Who, if not the dove?

It is for you, daughter of the Ouled M'Taâ, bee breeders, That, poor, I sought exile to find wealth... Now I return, also poor, And you are still, O Aini, the beautiful child Who picks pomegranates...

O Mathias! I said. His voice trembled. I thought he was going to burst into tears. He grabbed my hand, raised it to his lips, then, throwing it aside abruptly, he fled towards the coupe which received him, crossed the gate, disappeared into the shadows.

I was alone.

I didn't have time to pull myself together. The flight attendant called me and put me on board. He explained to me that I was the last passenger left on land. We were going to weigh anchor. Hoists were already gripping the gangway.

A butler was waiting for me at the entrance. He led me to my cabin. Single bed cabin. I had kept her to be alone.

The man, in black pants, in a white spencer, walked in front of me. Tall and slim, carefully pomaded jet-black hair, perfect parting and long ears. From head to toe, the correction itself. He advanced with a stiff and deliberate step, in the upper corridor of the first classes. The wooden partitions glowed softly under the frosted lamps. Everywhere we could hear the muffled hum of the fans. But the humid, heavy air circulated poorly. My isolated cabin was locked, which surprised me. The butler took a master key from his pocket, opened it, stepped aside, I passed. Then I turned to look at this man.

He stood, still stiff, in the doorway. A very brown face, and long, regular, sullen features. The body is slender, but bony and dry. As an expression, a wall.

Monsieur has no orders?...

So much cold courtesy on this side surprised me.

I say :

No. You can dispose. THANKS.

He took a small box from his pocket, placed it on the chest of drawers, bowed, went out, closed the door, without hurrying. I remained stunned. Then I rushed down the hallway.

Person.

"I'll meet him tomorrow," I thought, "at lunch. »

Back in the cabin, I took the box and opened it.

The ring was there.

I was not otherwise surprised. Nothing surprised me anymore. I placed the ring in the palm of my hand and examined it.

Was it the same? And the stone?... Nothing seemed to change.

Let's look at the lamp.

I lifted the ring and let the light from the bulb shine on the facets. They flashed lightning. The bearded dicu that I knew well, the Dionysus crowned with vine branches, was visible. Nothing new. But, inside me, Raphael, whose voice was close, whispered to me: "I see the god, and behind the dicu, his mother Persephone. » At this call, I tried to introspect through transparency. But in vain I turned the stone in all directions, I saw, behind the god, only an opaque material. Persephone had disappeared from the gem. I then remembered that, like the daughter of Ouled M'Taâ that the melancholic Kabyle had mentioned, she liked to pick and eat pomegranates... Fugitive thought... I put the ring on my finger and, having taken the box, I read there, at the bottom, these words: "Keep her, carefully, night and day. »

Well, I said to myself, we shouldn't be surprised at anything... Let's go on deck and get some fresh air.

The ship must have cast off its moorings and detached itself from the quay without shaking, because the bulkheads could be heard vibrating with the still slight shudder of the machines in motion...

I climbed onto the high footbridge, and the whole city appeared to me as if suspended in the night.

Although it was late, she still erected, between the country and the sea, innumerable lamps.

I have hardly experienced a hotter summer in my life. Because the heat had started early, if I remember, in May. Then, each day, it had slowly increased in power, without failing. From the beginning of June, the entire sky was ablaze. The relative coolness of the night evaporated a little after sunrise, and long after it had disappeared the scorching afternoon air lingered on the land. Unexpected and passionate movements animated beings. We have never seen so many bizarre accidents, abnormal catastrophes, disruptions in the lives of men. Large spots appeared on the sun. On June 12, an eruption of extraordinary violence produced a cataclysm whose ripples reached the earth. All the magnetic devices went mad. In an even stranger coincidence, there were famines in India, epidemics in Europe, and a feverish outbreak of deaths, suicides, and crimes almost everywhere. The earth was fermenting. Swarms of feverish insects were born. Along the lakes and ponds whose level had fallen, their hordes, drunk with anger, tormented night and day the sleep of the animals, which became restive and, for nothing, dangerously irritable. It seemed that, despite ourselves, we were doing everything at the wrong time. The resolutions we made led to contrary actions. We were thinking backwards. At times, we loved with a sort of hatred, and we hated with pleasure out of love. The most reasonable sometimes acted, without explaining it, foolishly enough to doubt their mental rectitude. This doubt alone marked a remnant of common sense. The prudent and wise had withdrawn into themselves and were patient. We had a feeling that the torrid heat was not the only cause. The direct effects were observed; but a more subtle radiation, also more noxious, pierced the incandescent spray. It was an invisible wave of fire. It exasperated the electrical networks which vibrate in the latent body by which our sensitive body doubles. What I'm saying here is not made up. Serious scientists, attached to facts and devoid of any fantasy, then noted strange coincidences between the increase in solar heat and the troubles which agitated, that year, on earth, the lives of men.

I therefore speak of it, being entirely in composure, and not without design. I see there the reason for my actions, which, undoubtedly, were not those that my character suggested. What I did, I would not have done a year earlier. And what I have since been able to do, would I have done, if heaven and earth had not, that year, entered into flames and bordered on madness?

When I went up to the upper deck, I found no one there. A few weak electric bulbs alone illuminated this deserted bridge here and there.

Alongside the ship the docks passed by. They arrived on the water, oily and smooth, slowly, in complete silence. Their massive bases, as we passed, raised specters, ghostly hangars, monstrous cranes, hallucinatory footbridges... All these beings seemed doomed to helplessness and abandoned to the humid night. Sometimes, on a zinc roof, a wooden panel stood, which announced, in monumental white letters, the name of a shipping company, Touache, Schiaffino, Messageries, Paquet, Cyprien Fabre, still others, English, Italians, Scandinavians, emerging suddenly and quickly erased. A freighter with a high stern appeared then disappeared behind piles of crates. Huddled apart, old liners awaited death, others the careening basin. On board, night and silence... Further on, sleeping wagons were spread out in front of rows of barrels, mountains of bags, piles of light-colored crates. Everywhere floated the smell of goods, tar, peanut oil, fermented coal... Almost at water level, green or red lights glided, which could be seen rising and falling as the ship passed. , nerve buoys.

And then, we put to sea. It was barely a brief eddy announcing the pass; and, when I turned towards the earth, I discovered the entire constellation of the city, extended from West to East in a reddish fog, where voluminous columns of smoke rose. The sky was low. A ceiling of mist hung over the coast. The shore remained invisible. So the city seemed suspended on the abyss, itself invisible, of the heavy and dark sea. But was it really a city?... And from the disappearance of its houses, which the night had swallowed up, what still remained visible, these thousands of lights, was it not the complicated drawing of a thought? A thought of which all these lights made up an immense branch, and which offered only a vague, mysterious meaning. Nothing supported it in the yawning space where its motionless flames flickered. Long-lit ramps sometimes revealed an ascending path, but which suddenly stopped in the air, for no reason, and we sensed a terrible cliff, the breaking of the ground, then a cliff falling into the abyss. Elsewhere garlands curved, and their designs, still unfinished, opened up to thought the expanses of the void and the absurd. Everywhere lines of fire were outlined, crisscrossing this black brain of the city. But the draft did not come to fruition, and the signs perceived remained indecipherable. However, these enigmas of lights shimmered, sparkled, flamed, above the shore abolished by night, creating, in the absence of an understandable idea, the broad outlines of nocturnal sleep and, on this city detached from its body, the map of his dreams... Alone, the nervous network of this disappeared body still quivered and launched its electric waves through the nocturnal nothingness. But, as we moved further away over the misty sea, the quivering became less intense, the lamps, which came closer, composed groups, crowded into clusters, and, still brilliant, however gradually lost their power. vibratory. Soon they were no longer, on this black space without horizon, only a single light like a solitary lamp... And I imagined this lamp, the lamp of the last watchman, leaning at the top of the city on this thought delivered to the sleep...

The image of Surac came to mind.

And immediately within me the lights of the city went out. The night devoured the last fire. The world was black. I only heard the monotonous movement of the machines and the sound of the bow cutting through the sea.

The image of Surac had no shape or color, and, in fact, I saw nothing of it, but I had a precise, inescapable feeling of its proximity. He didn't speak, and I could hear him. Darkness had abolished the sea, confused the sky and the waters. Of the entire Universe, only the ship remained, and of the ship only this deserted deck, where I was alone. If suddenly Surac, evoked by memory, imposed his presence on me, he had only delegated his mental existence. I listened to him who was thinking inside me. That was all. But it was impossible for me to misunderstand it. This thought was his. I would not have been able, alone, and thinking for myself, to conceive of something so lucid, so striking, so graspable. The most modest, born from me, would have seemed to me a rare diamond, while I found radiant ones, but born from him, which crossed my impassive mind, without succeeding in moving it. I would never have treated the thought that developed within me, if it had been my own thought, with such casualness. Because I made it play, by whim, before my eyes, between the abyss of the dark sea and the darkness of the starless sky, where my destiny held me suspended, and which hung only by this thin thread...

Surac said to me, in his neutral, jerky, peremptory voice:

Fixed lamps. The motionless illumination of an immense tree of useful light. Every night, the same fires, in the same place, known. Not even signs. Thought? You call that a thought? A thought moves and methodically carries its lamp, from mirror to mirror, when it unfolds its meditation, Your city has thought, perhaps, but thought, once and for all, the idea it had of itself- even, and she fixed it on the shapes of her body, whose insignificant outline these lights trace, quite without her knowing, in the Laine night. True thought is of another nature, and here, romantically, you only take the picturesque. Follow the wave, listen to the movement of the sea waves.

This movement was imperceptible, and yet the immense fluid breathed. He gently lifted the ship's docile hull. He lifted me too, my body went away, barely balanced. I was carried away steadily on the faint ripple of slow, long water. The rhythm of the sea erased from me the visible, and, of all the lamps of the city which had populated me for a moment, the shimmer was abolished without effort. I entered the world of spaces inaccessible to figures, where impersonally my own thought reflected the meditation of a universal thought, which had, it seemed, neither origin, nor necessity, nor destination, and which, without ever 'stop being born, didn't stop ending. Birth and end of which we did not know where or when the mystery was accomplished.

But two lovers ventured onto the bridge, saw me, hesitated, and disappeared.

Their passing is enough to make me fall from reflection into my memories. I regained my footing in my own situation. I tried to imagine what this journey was leading towards, banal at first, then crossed by singular events from which I had barely emerged, and, for the future, uncertain. Unsure like me. Did I know what awaited me? But how could I know that if I didn't know what I expected of myself? Yet, alone in the night, on this indifferent sea, which rocked me, I tried to see clearly, and my memory was kind to me. The days I lived offered me signs. Could I not, by returning to it, draw out a drawing of myself in which I could recognize myself? Would it be impossible for me to achieve, having taken this knowledge, the destiny for which I had been created, if however I had been created for any destiny whatsoever, except that of passing uselessly on earth? Even today, this exploration, which I have made of myself, without tiring, since this very strange night, what has it brought me that is certain? and do I know any more, after the dramatic events, of which chance, or destiny, had just presented me with the first characters? Take stock, but where? I searched, I'm still searching. When will I find it? And do we find?...

Can a look back at myself today enlighten me a little?...